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Remix as a practice of listening

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Abstract

In this essay, I will discuss the use of remix as a practice of political listening framed by socio-political resistances rather than the popular culture that has influenced much of remix practice and literature. This project seeks to engage with ideas and practices of organisation and resistance expressed by different activists and collectives in my remixes.

These aims lead to my proposal of *rearguard remix* to engage, learn from and recirculate the knowledge of different forms of political engagement. To develop this concept of remix I work with the ideas of an active *rearguard* articulated by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and the *rearguard researcher* as proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

In her idea of an active rearguard, Rivera Cusicanqui suggests the researcher needs to listen first instead of assuming that they must search for answers; and in the case of de Sousa Santos the rearguard researcher is committed to 'know with' rather than 'know about' (2014, p. *ix*).

In this regard, I consider the processes of remix practice as a non-extractive form of inquiry, that explores and creates relations between political ideas and practices. In the processes of sampling and remixing repetition, and the familiarisation that comes with it, allows for knowing the videos used in more depth, which I consider a process of learning to listen. I will elaborate on the political implications of this process later in this essay.

In the video materials I work with, I privilege the oral expression of ideas, experiences and knowledges – from a digital oral archive formed by critical, indigenous, feminist, and anarchist activists-researchers and their collectives. These audio-visual materials have been shared on platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, or other social media. The remix *Tenemos Redes que Seguir Tejiendo* ('We Have Threads to Keep Weaving')*,* deals with indigenous resistance – land, knowledge, and way of life against extractive and state megaprojects. It also includes discussions about the role of land struggles in indigenous identities and the political consequences of indigenous organisations. These conversations question essentialist ideas regarding identification, community, collective organisation, and the consequences of these forms of knowledge.

This essay starts with a discussion of *sampling* and its role in remix. I then discuss the need to learn to listen as a practice for solidarity. Lastly, I discuss the role of *recirculation* and the logic of sharing in remix practice.

The video can be seen here.

Introduction: Sampling and remix

The conceptualisation of remix and its processes is multidisciplinary and often confuses remix with other techniques or strategies of composition (Gallagher, 2017a). Remix theorists have discussed bricolage, montage, *détournement,* pastiche, collage, and juxtaposition as modes of remix in different media *or* as being distinct from remix practice. Broadly speaking the positions of remix theorists range from the notion that remix can be a metaphor to understand all cultural processes to a narrow definition of remix that involves specific techniques like sampling.

My remix practice involves working with a much narrower definition of remix as articulated by musician and theorist Owen Gallagher. For him 'not everything is a remix' (2017a, p. 31). Gallagher differentiates two compositional stages of remix: sampling and remixing. Sampling refers to the 'appropriation of an extant recorded artefact as source material' (2017b, p. 260). Remixing involves:

> … deciding which samples to use, where to place them in the composition, creating juxtapositions of meaning by placing two different samples in temporal or spatial proximity, or recombining them in some way to produce something novel (2017b, p. 261).

Gallagher argues that 'sampling is a fundamental property that makes remix what it is and separates it from all other forms' (2017a, p. 31). His conception of the centrality of sampling as fundamental to remix allowed me to think remix beyond the popular culture context in which it is often discussed. It also helped me to move beyond the discussions of remix as a metaphor for all cultural processes.

Drawing on Gallagher's definition, I followed a line of inquiry that is concerned with the importance of specificity and differentiation. A line that applies both to remix practice and activist debate in the context of socio-political struggles.

This involves the need to see the role of sampling in relation to specific materials –video and audio produced by grassroots activists and activist intellectuals-militant researchers. Sampling has an important role to play in learning to listen and as a way of engaging with a digital oral archive that is being produced by people and collectives who are discussing their struggles and political practices.

There are many examples of sample-based video work that are part of the field of contemporary art practice. Soda Jerk have produced a large body of work along these lines including 'The Time that Remains' (2012) and 'Terror Nullius' (2018). Christian Marclay is another artist who has worked in this way with 'Telephones' (1995) and 'The Clock' (2010). I share a methodology of sampling and remix with these artists however rather than sampling largely from narrative cinema as they do, I draw from video and audio produced by grassroots activists and activist intellectuals/militant researchers in the context of socio-political struggles.

'Los pueblos se miran a sí mismos'

In the last three decades, Latin America has seen the emergence of social movements and resistance against the appropriation and devastation wrought by neoliberal and extractivist economies. Consequently, collectives and communities have been organising in defence of their land, common goods, biodiversity, and collective survival. This is part of a broader pattern of struggles and collective practices by indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples in Latin America but also movements and resistances that seek the 'revival of non-Western ethical, cultural, and political imaginations in Africa, Asia and the Islamic world' (2014, p. 21).

As sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains:

> [t]his is the case of movements or grammars of resistance that have been emerging against oppression, marginalization, and exclusion, whose ideological bases often have very little to do with the dominant Western cultural and political references prevalent throughout the twentieth century (2014, p. 21).

These 'grammars of resistance' are mobilised to recuperate a life with dignity eroded and violently disrupted by the continuity of different forms of colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. These resistances and their ethical and political concepts have brought a diversity of epistemologies and ontologies to the 'insurgent political imagination' for the purposes of emancipation. These kinds of knowledges are what de Sousa Santos calls 'knowledges born in struggle' in the context of the Epistemologies of the South (2014, p. *x*).

There are important debates questioning theoretical or methodological approaches regarding social movements and knowledge production from postcolonial, feminist, subaltern or decolonial perspectives. However, many of the protagonists of these struggles also have been theorising, reflecting, and

interpreting their own experiences of resistance. Popular educator Raul Zibechi points to this as a general characteristic of anti-neoliberal social movements in Latin America,

New ways of thinking emerged from this other world. Up to now, the production of theory was undertaken by agencies of the state, the academy, and political parties. Now the movement[s] itself produces theories that are embodied in non-capitalist social relations (2012, p. 53).

In Bolivia, in the context of the mobilisations against the privatisation of water and the gas conflict in 2000 and 2003, important questions were raised by a series of scholars and militant researchers in theorising socio-political struggles. Sociologist and activist Raquel Gutierrez discusses these questions in her article *The Rhythms of the Pachakuti* (2012). Gutierrez describes how within the popular mobilisations people were discussing and interpreting their own experiences of resistance (2012, p. 52). This characteristic has been seen in many places, particularly in indigenous struggles such as the Zapatistas in Mexico and the popular and indigenous resistances in Ecuador since the 1990s (there are many other examples).

In words of Maya-Quiche sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul, 'los pueblos se miran a sí mismos y se miran entre sí' ('the communities look back at themselves and also look at one another') (CLACSO TV, 2022). This refers to the ongoing discussion and interpretation by communities of their own organisation, strategies and struggles but also, how they learn from other geographical experiences and their forms of organisation, recovery and defence of territory, knowledge and commons goods.

A large debate in the social sciences questions the notion of objectivity and positivist paradigms of social inquiry in relation to social movements or as Zibechi refers to them '*pueblos en movimiento'* ('peoples in movement') (2019). The questions that arise regarding how to engage with these theories, struggles and their political imaginaries are not only methodological but also ethical and political.

Many militant researchers and activists have been critical as to how the political experiences of organisation have been used as raw material in academia, appropriating concepts from indigenous intellectuals in ways that not only depoliticise and decontextualise them, but that precludes any kind of meaningful interaction (See Said, Visvanathan, Simpson, Rivera Cusicanqui). (This is a rich discussion that I acknowledge but I cannot expand on here). In this essay, I focus precisely on the demand for an engagement with ideas, theories, and practices not as *resources* but as critical, political projects.

These demands are in line with the concerns of Gutierrez and Zibechi in the context of social mobilisation: how to engage theoretically with collective struggles and their concepts and frameworks of reflection. One form of engagement that is 'non-extractivist' in the terms that have been discussed above, is what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls being a 'rearguard researcher'.

This involves a commitment to 'knowing *with*, understanding, […] sharing, and walking alongside' instead of the vanguard theory that aims to explain and know *about* (Santos, 2014*,* p. *ix*) [italics are mine]. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, a Bolivian sociologist also makes a connection between an *active rearguard* (in Salazar Lohman, 2015, p. 161) and the role of listening, as one way to engage with these practices and political projects as an activist-researcher.

The emphasis de Sousa Santos places on the 'rearguard researcher' and Rivera Cusicanqui's 'active rearguard' make listening to a necessary condition for engaging with political projects and their emancipatory practices. In relation to these ideas, my creative project uses video remix as a form of engagement that, instead of explaining, works with the activist's own interpretations of struggle and engages with their debates. This is presented in an articulation of fragments that brings together a diversity of projects that share common struggles /forms of organisation. By presenting this remix alongside the original materials I share these knowledge and experiences. Remix as a practice of listening. I emphasise the importance of cultivating a practice that has been undermined by mainstream systems of knowledge that have permeated our sociability.

Political listening in sampling

I have described the concept of sampling according to Gallagher's definition in the section on remix theory. Remix culture is strongly associated with music production and other audio-visual practices. However, as my remix deals with different kinds of source material, the process of sampling has specific characteristics. Here I discuss the kind of listening I am doing and what happens in this process. I also reflect on the characteristics of a sample and its role in the articulation of rearguard remix.

In remix theory and practice, sampling is considered a distinctive part of the process. In the process of a rearguard remix, listening is a means to generate samples and an ongoing practice. In my master's exegesis, there is an in-depth discussion about the epistemological and ontological implications of listening, a discussion that I briefly summarise here.

Philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara in her book *The Other Side of Language. A philosophy of listening* (1990) argues that Western languages are more concerned with 'the power of discourse' than with the 'strength of listening,' while linguist Carlos Lenkersdorf shows that Tojolabal language and culture can be thought of not so much as a cosmovision but as a *cosmoaudition.* He considered Tojolabal as 'language of the people that know how to listen'(Lenkersdorf, 2008, p. 122). He worked closely with Maya-Tojolabal communities in Chiapas.

In the same vein linguist Nicholas Evans explains the word *ngurrahmalkwonawoniyan*, and with it gives us a glimpse into the world of Dalabon language. This Aboriginal language is polysynthetic, so this word is composed by the agglutination of other words which in English can be translated as: 'let's listen, let's attend carefully to this country, to this path' and also 'let's think about where to go next' (Evans, 2017, p. 34).

These languages and cultures of the southeast of Mexico and the Arnhem Land region of Australia are examples of different epistemologies that permeates the way people organise, learn, and relate to each other and their surroundings. Reimagining practices of listening has important implications that go beyond Western knowledge systems. Corradi Fiumara argues that:

> If we were *apprentices of listening* rather than masters of discourse, we might perhaps promote a different sort of coexistence among humans: not so much in the form of a utopian ideal but rather as an incipient philosophical solidarity capable of envisaging the common destiny of the species. (1990, p. 57) [My emphasis]

The practice of listening I am learning is concerned with this 'solidarity' as Corradi Fiumara suggests. In the context of a rearguard remix, how can this solidarity be translated?

Journalist and activist John Gibler uses what he calls political listening. In his book *Una Historia Oral de la Infamia* [*Couldn't Even Imagine that They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks Against the Students of Ayotzinapa,*] he reconstructs the events of September 26, 2014, from testimonies of rural teacher students of Ayotzinapa who survived brutal police attacks in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico. The attacks resulted in the killing of six students and the enforced disappearance of 43[1].

The response to these events from the authorities was confusing and lacked transparency. A weak response that did not correspond to the magnitude of the violence perpetrated on the students in Iguala. To get first-hand information, Gibler went to Ayotzinapa and priorised the oral accounts of the survivors of the attacks and relatives of the missing students. When answering why he decided to only to work with testimonies of the victims he explains,

> I, at least, think as a way to locate the work, to orientate where to go, who to listen to, I ask: *who does this story most hurt?* Who is really suffering? The people who lived it in their bodies, and the ones that now live the absence of those who disappeared. (Para leer en libertad, 2016) [My translation]

In this way Gibler gives me an ethical principle that guides my own listening. Gibler's words reflect the practices and conceptualisations of politics I am trying to engage with. The act of listening in my *rearguard* remix practice involves paying attention to the struggles of those who have resisted different kinds of oppression. The knowledge of these people is incorporated in bodies and subjectivity that have been experienced individually and collectively. It is important for me to listen to the words of the indigenous peoples, the anarchist and feminist activists, the relatives of the forcibly disappeared, and the women and people who have been affected by state violence in multiple ways. In other words, the ones who have been *most hurt*.

Recirculation

The logic of sharing of this research relates to both the Epistemologies of the South and the anti-copyright principle of remix culture; the sharing of the remixes in the case of the latter and the need to share the knowledge and experiences of political struggles in the case of the former. As I have discussed above, the samples in my remixes are a form of knowledge I would like other people to listen to.

The process of remix allows me to sample short phrases – at times aphoristic – but also to relate ideas in ways that no other means of investigation allows me. In presenting my video remixes on a website along with their original videos, I can share the samples in an arrangement but also to let the viewer/listener access the original materials and explore them at length. By presenting both my remix and the original videos, I can share and keep circulating the knowledge I have encountered and valued. To discuss this aspect of recirculation I am using Joan Foncuberta's idea of *adoption* (2016). This idea marks a shift away from the term 'appropriation' and helps me to conceptualise *rearguard* remix in the light of the logic of sharing.

Adoption not appropriations

The concept of appropriation has been widely discussed in remix studies, with less discussion of the term of recirculation. In order to rethink these concepts, I draw on the work of social scientist Shiv Visvanathan. In his presentation In the Search for Cognitive Justice (2009) he argues that knowledge should be shared. He explains that Indian law differentiates property in terms of flock and flow.

Citing philosopher of law Chhatrapati Singh, Visvanathan explains that Indian jurisprudence makes a distinction between flock as something that can be considered property, such as land, as opposed to water which is considered flow. This means that if water crosses a property, it can be used by the owners of the property but cannot be possessed. Visvanathan suggests that if we considered information and knowledge as flow, these should not be possessed and accumulated but shared. As the logic of sharing is expressed in the form of remix but also as an aim of the Epistemologies of the South, I have sought concepts that can express this logic in terms of flow and not as the flock that can become property.

In remix culture there is a strong element of anti-copyright activism. Remix artists have advocated for 'fair use' and have helped to drive initiatives such as Copyleft and Creative Commons licensing. 'Appropriation' is a widely used term in remix theory that describes one of the creative strategies of remix practice (Navas et al., 2017). It refers to the sampling of pre-existing recorded materials and is discussed in terms of authorship, creativity, and artistic practice. In my conceptualisation of rearguard remix, I am using the term 'adoption' instead of appropriation to better reflect a logic of sharing as opposed to the logic of property that the term appropriation brings and to highlight that collective knowledge has to be shared and to flow in the terms of Visvanathan.

I follow artist and writer Joan Foncuberta in my use of the term 'adoption.' Foncuberta's reflection on post-photography allows me to think about how the practice of remix intersects with the proliferation of digital media. His book *La Furia de las Imágenes* (2017) (*The Fury of Images*) is a sociological, philosophical, and political reflection on the changes in photography that stem from digital technologies. These changes have dissolved notions of originality and property as well effecting a 'dematerialisation of authorship' (Fontcuberta, 2017, p. 40).

While Fontcuberta's proposal of post-photography is related to our use and experience of the digital image, from the point of view of my remix practice many of Fontcuberta's arguments regarding post-photography equally apply to internet video. Foncuberta echoes Walter Benjamin in his discussion of how the status of the work of art has changed in 'the age of digital appropriability' (2017, p. 40). With this he refers to the easy access that allows us to download images or video from the internet.

In his idea of post-photography, Fontcuberta sees the 'appropriability' of digital technologies not only as their condition but also as a paradigm that he calls an 'aesthetics of access' that leads to recycling and remix (2017, p. 40). However, the term 'appropriation' is associated with property and a sense of dispossession. Instead, the term adoption, in its Latin roots ad optare, not only captures better the sense of choosing but also of caring for something (2017, p. 56). In Fontcuberta's words,

> […] In the same way we can adopt an image as we would adopt an idea, an image that we have chosen because it has a determined value: intellectual, symbolic, aesthetic, moral, spiritual, or political (2017, p. 60) (My translation)

In the case of a *rearguard* remix, I would add that I also adopt certain clips because they have an ethical value. In my process of sampling and remixing, I can relate Fontcuberta's arguments to the ideas, practices and knowledge sampled in my video remixes. Here Foncuberta elaborates on the public dimension that the term adoption has in distinction to the term appropriation:

To adopt an image is always equivalent to recognising symbolic value in a public way, professing an attitude to our neighbour […] If appropriation is private, adoption on the contrary is by definition a form of public declaration. To appropriate means 'to capture', while adoption means 'to declare to have chosen'. In adoption it is the act of choosing, not dispossessing, that prevails (2017, p. 60) [My translation].

By adopting the knowledge, I have sampled I am 'declaring to have chosen' the political practices and ethical values I care about and think are needed to enrich our political discussions and imaginaries. The public choosing of these samples is reflected in the free sharing and publishing of my remixes. A *rearguard* remix is not about creating an argument but about articulating relationships that show the diversity of ideas, practices, and struggles. I want other people to engage in a form of political listening to this knowledge and to get to know them better by

accessing the original videos. Publishing the original videos with my remixes is another way for me to adopt, to publicly declare to have chosen the original videos.

The recirculation of these remixes and their original sources is a way to keep ideas and ethics in what Visvanathan calls the flow of knowledge (2009). By sharing the reflections of people involved in resistances and other collective projects in their own terms and voices, my aim is for other people to listen, learn and nurture their political imagination, and hopefully to put some of these ideas into their own practice.

Conclusion

I have discussed sampling and recirculation in relation to remix and in the context of the materials I work with. I consider these materials vital knowledge, expressed orally, that cannot be wasted. The fragments I have remixed in *We Have Threads to Keep Weaving* challenges common understandings of the *political*. In my remix the political is expressed in terms of collective decision making rather than being connected to state power and the individual as in liberal democracy. Gladys Tzul Tzul explains:

> […] If we think the political as a weft and not as individual subjects of representation but a series of relationships and strategies, then we could understand, we could get closer to a non-state-centric interpretation of the political. Politics is not solely the kind that exists within the horizon of contesting state power and transforming it […] for me, the political subject is not an individual but the communal weft and the social relations that are established and are produced in the communitarian world, in the communal world [My translation] (ALICE CES, 2016).

The struggles many of the activist are referring in the remix are specific and situated. The viewer can see this in the diversity of voices, presences, landscapes, places, and temporalities. The speakers in my remix also reflect on historical and ongoing attack to their collective life by capitalist, colonial and heteropatriarchal imperatives of dominant epistemologies and hegemonic systems. Their organisation and struggle also convey the work of becoming a community with the capacity to sustain life for collective survival of both humans and non-human beings. There many more valuable and important voices and experiences beyond those that I have included in my remix work. *Rearguard* remix is an invitation to engage with this diversity and to contemplate how there are always other voices that we are yet to hear, more experiences that we can learn from. Like remix itself the practice of listening to these voices and experiences is always incomplete and unfinished.

Footnotes

[1] The state investigation of the government of Enrique Peña Nieto in 2014 has been contested by the ongoing demands for truth and justice from the mothers and fathers of the students. What the government of Mexico called the 'historical truth' has been debunked by the numerous eye-witness accounts, the work of journalists, independent forensic analysis, and investigation of the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (GIEI) who have been working since 2015. The result of the experts' investigation reveals the participation of organised crime, local, state, and federal police in the attacks with knowledge of higher officials of the Mexican army and the covering up of the evidence by different state institutions including the army, navy, ex-attorney general and many other officials in charge in 2014. The GIEI has documented evidence in four reports since then, the last one published in October of 2022. For more information about the GIEI https://sur.conectas.org/en/unprecedented-exercise-international-supervision/

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